

POSITIVELY

By Richard Evanoff

Anarchism has always had an image problem. Sometimes when I tell people I'm an anarchist, they move to the other side of the room and ask me if I've got a bomb in my briefcase. In the popular imagination an anarchist is a person who believes in the violent overthrow of the government, political assassinations, bomb-throwing, window-smashing, heavy metal music, and punk hair styles. How, people sometimes ask me, can such a seemingly conventional guy like myself be an *anarchist*? After all, I've never advocated the violent overthrow of the government, engaged in a political assassination, or thrown a bomb. I don't care much for the Sex Pistols or orange hair either (although other anarchists might). I confess that I smashed a window once playing baseball in Little League — talk about aggressive, violence-prone organizations!

Certainly anarchism often expresses itself in negative terms. The word anarchism, after all, is derived from the Greek expression, *an archos*, which literally means "no government." Simply put, anarchists believe it's possible for people to live, work, and play together in relative peace and harmony without any help from the nation-state. Getting along with others is something most of us would probably like to do anyways, and we certainly don't need a ponderous system of bureaucracies, regulations, coercion, and legitimized violence to bring us closer together. Anarchism is not the absence of order (as many people mistakenly believe, including some who call themselves anarchists!), but rather the absence of any overarching authority which compels order. The order we accept is the order we ourselves freely create, sort of like taking a bunch of blocks laying around at random and building a house with them — a constructive activity. Building the house, just like building a new society, requires skill, initiative, and self-discipline (qualities anarchists themselves forget at times), but not compulsion, authority, and control.

Most of us, I think, would prefer to live in a house instead of a pile of rubble, and most of us would also probably prefer to live in a free and just society than in an oppressive and unjust one. Yet when most people try to imagine what an "anarchist society" would be like, they think of a society in which nothing works, people are only

concerned about themselves, crime is rampant, murder is commonplace, war follows war, the economy is in shambles, there is no civil order, no responsible leadership, people are consumed with selfish desires, folks are hungry, they have no homes, factories are closed, businesses shut down, there's no work, children roam the streets, schools are dilapidated, alcohol and drug abuse soars, chaos reigns. And so on *ad nauseum*.

The society I have just described, of course, is not an anarchist society. Rather, it is a fairly accurate description of the society we presently live in. The irony, of course, is that people have got it backwards in thinking that our present society is "good" and "just" whereas any future anarchist society must be unimaginably terrifying and violent. Quite the opposite. The fact is that "the system," as it used to be called in the 60s, is in pretty bad shape and getting worse. Society as it is presently constituted is simply unable to satisfy people's most basic human needs, not only material needs, but also social, intellectual, and artistic needs. The problem isn't just the documented decline in material living standards over the past twenty years for all classes of people except the very rich. The problem is also the lack of meaning and vitality; the nihilistic "nothing matters"; the cynical sneer saying nothing can be done; the hollow look in the eyes of people who no longer care; our increasing inability to relate to others, to the larger environment, and even to our own selves.

Precisely because society as it presently constituted is unable to satisfy people's basic human needs, it is necessary for us to take this responsibility on ourselves. We can't depend on the government to take care of us, since the government is mainly only interested in maintaining its own power and prerogatives. We can't depend on corporations to be concerned about our personal, social, and ecological quality of life, because the corporations are mainly only interested in their own profits. In the end, we can only depend on ourselves — which is precisely what freedom, independence, self-reliance, and community support have always been about.

But learning this sense of self-reliance isn't something that's going to come all at once. Our social conditioning has encouraged us to remain totally dependent on a Big Brother who would rather keep us in state of psychological

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adolescence than help us to achieve full maturity as adults who are able to look after ourselves. Our present system panders to our more infantile desires by giving us junk food, junk entertainment, junk dope, junk jobs, junk education, junk culture, and just plain junk. The only thing that keeps the system going is the fact that a lot of people get suckered into it — for a while anyways. Why involve ourselves with artistic expression,

even willingly abdicated that responsibility. Our adolescent denial of responsibility has made it impossible for us to be really in control of our own lives and the society we live in. Too many people have come to feel that as long as we get our thrills, we can leave the responsibility bit up to the government and corporations. And when we don't get what they want, we can throw a tantrum and go through our adolescent rebellion routine, protesting



Photo by Paul Takeuchi

intellectual development, political organizing, social change, or any other worthwhile struggle when we can retreat to the isolated cubicles of our homes, sit back, and be *entertained*? Prior to its fall, the Roman Empire operated on the same basic principle as our contemporary consumerist society: while the leaders ran the affairs of state to their own advantage, they kept people's minds off the ensuing social deterioration by blissing them out with "bread and circuses" — what we now call consumer goods and entertainment. If the analogy is correct (and in essence I believe it is), then by following our present course we're headed straight back to the Dark Ages, a time of anarchy in the bad sense if there ever was one.

The end result of our society's incessant social programming is that the power of our "leaders" increases while the power of ordinary citizens decreases. We've been conditioned *not* to take social responsibility — and in many cases we have

our lost rights and blaming Father Government and Mother Corporation for not really loving us.

But the best way to regain these rights which we have already lost — the right to a decent society and a decent way of life — is to once again take up our responsibilities instead of pushing them off on our "leaders." This project means rediscovering our faith in ourselves and in those immediately around us. It means living our own lives instead of miming the vacuous lives of video heroes; composing our own music instead of falling on our knees in awe of the stars; creating our own modes of intelligence instead of relying on the sterile ideas of "experts"; making our own decisions instead of leaving them up to pandering politicians — in short, doing for ourselves what no one else can properly do for us, living authentically rather than vicariously.

Anarchists are fond of saying that the revolution starts here and now. Unlike Marxists who preach a

future utopian society attainable only after the proletariat has taken control of the government through a bloody revolution, anarchists look at revolution as an unfolding process, an ongoing event that has absolutely nothing to do with taking control of the government. The revolution begins with the revolution of consciousness, which might be likened to a kind of enlightenment experience in which individuals begin to discover their inner selves and to realize their full potential as human beings (many, though not all, anarchists are nonreligious, however). This experience is not the acceptance of some particular ideology since anarchism, again quite unlike Marxism, has always denounced fixed dogmas and party lines, and encouraged multiple points of view. Even this article is but one interpretation of the anarchist vision.

Self-actualizing individuals can only reach their fullest potential, however, if they are able to share themselves with others. So it's natural that after starting to get their own act together as individuals, they begin to seek out other self-actualizing persons. Small informal communities naturally form — anarchists call them "affinity groups." An affinity group is not a formal organization, but any gathering, whether consciously anarchist or not, in which people form deep bonds with each other. Having an "affinity" with others doesn't mean that everyone in the group must think, act, or look alike. A healthy affinity group functions on the same unity-in-diversity principle as ecosystems: maximum diversity is a precondition for maximum unity. Very different types of people are brought together into an organic whole to share their rich individualities with each other — celebrating, rather than merely accepting, differences in age, class, race, gender, lifestyle, creed, sexual orientation etc. By treating people as *people* rather than as social, sexual, or economic *objects*, we begin to see how we can relate to others on the basis of egalitarian mutual aid rather than on the basis of competitive power relations.

Such small groups are the workshops of the new society, the place where people begin to learn the skills that will help us "build the new society in the shell of the old," as an old IWW slogan puts it. The positive, constructive energy required to build this new society is enormous. We need new democratic workplaces which are owned and operated by the workers themselves, without profits being skimmed off by nonproducing absentee landlord-stockholders. We need ecosensitive products and services which involve the creativity and craftsmanship of the people who make them and are produced to satisfy genuine human needs, not artificial needs created by advertising. We need a new noncompulsory educational system in which students learn because they want to learn, not because capitalist society requires people who have been indoctrinated into its ways. We need a new system of social welfare, not one which is run by a distant government bureaucracy but one which is totally controlled and funded by in-touch local communities. We need a

new participatory culture in which people are able to actively develop and share their talents with each other, not a passive consumer culture dominated by an entertainment "industry" which puts profits above self-expression. The list goes on: we need new spiritual gathering places, new alternative forms of media, new areas reclaimed as wilderness, new ways of living, thinking, and being.

Creating new social forms means creating alternative institutions. Existing alternative magazines, cooperatives, self-help groups—many of which are consciously based on anarchist principles—might serve as models for building alternative institutions in other areas of society. One institution we don't need, of course, is the government, since our aim is to keep power in our own hands rather than give it up to "elected" representatives who don't really represent us anyways, despite all claims to the contrary. Our focus should be on the positive, constructive work to be done, not on trying to tear the old system down. Leave the destructive impulses to those who support the old order; all destruction is ultimately self-destruction anyways. Anarchists don't need to throw bombs or break bank windows to achieve their purposes. Some anarchists have said that tearing down the old system will come as the revolution's final act, only after the groundwork has been laid with patient labor and the new social order is in place. Actually, once the new structures are firmly established, the old structures will most likely fall of their accord; we will have rendered them irrelevant. The collapse of state capitalism in Eastern Europe is but a foreshadowing of the collapse of private capitalism in the West.

Pacifist anarchists, such as Gandhi and Tolstoy, have eschewed all forms of violence. And nonviolence seems like a good working principle for anarchists who see our primary task as creating new social forms rather than simply destroying old ones. But as we attempt to create the new society we will be confronting, inevitably if unintentionally, the "powers that be." And they're not going to like it very much when they see their base of power slipping away because fewer and fewer people take them seriously. We have a right, I think, to *defend* ourselves (and wild nature) from all forms of authoritarian oppression, which may indeed involve confrontation, but at the same time we have the responsibility to *create* a new social order in which all forms of authoritarian oppression are eliminated. As the new society grows, like a chick hatching out of its shell, we'll encounter resistance. But if we just keep on growing, nothing can keep us from breaking through.

In any event, next time you see me, please don't move to the other side of the room. I do not have a bomb in my briefcase. I don't even have a wild, demented look in my eyes. Anarchism is not about death, destruction, and chaos, but about life, construction, and creativity. There's a whole new world to build. Positively!